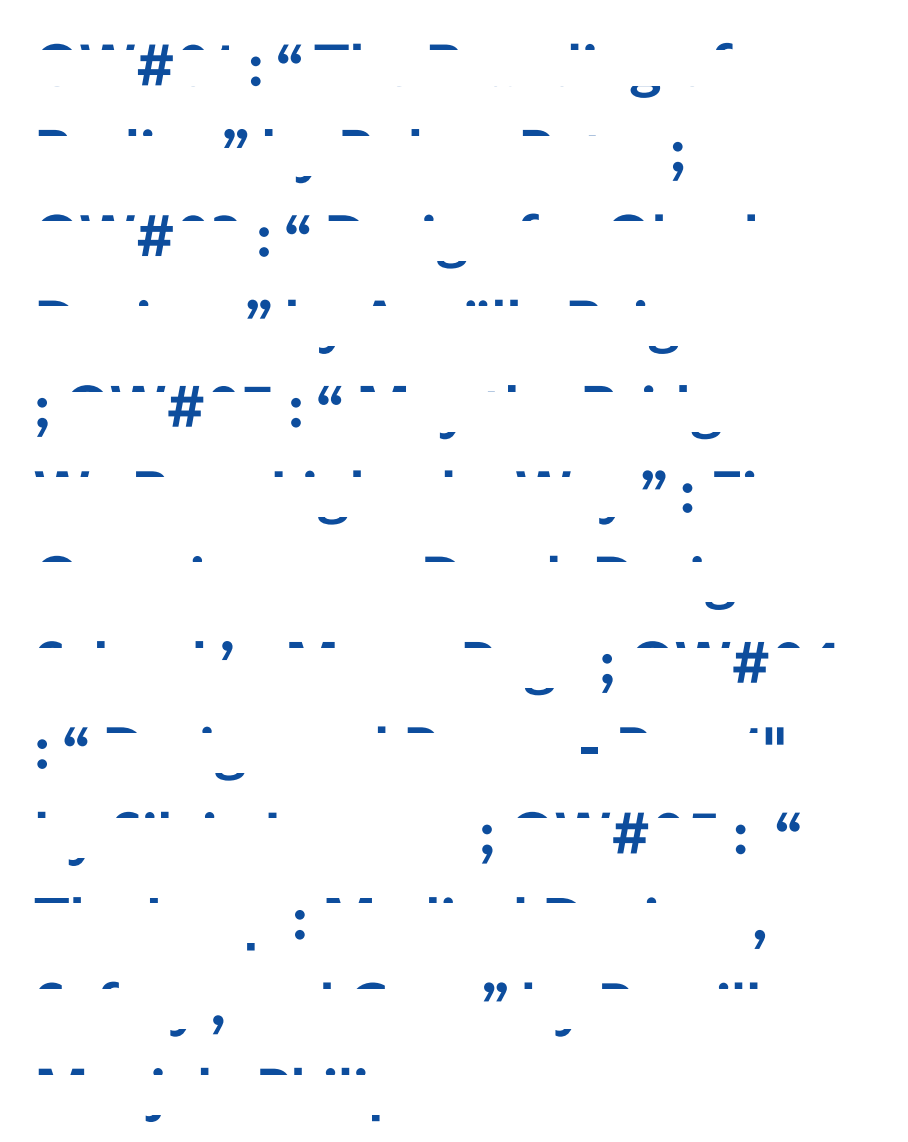

OTHER WORLDS BULLETIN I

#01 - #05

OTHER WORLDS BULLETIN I

#01 ; #02 ; #03 ; #04 ; #05

Introduction

Other Worlds (OW) is a journal-as-newsletter for design research, criticism and transformation. OW aims at making the social, political, cultural and technical complexities surrounding design practices legible and, thus, mutable. What other worlds, exactly? Those that have been traditionally ignored, neglected or silenced in the past, as well as those that are overlooked today: non-Western communities negotiating their own set of values through practice, alternative rationalities overshadowed by the instrumental reason, technosocial environments blossoming at the periphery of platform empires, semi-visible modes of organization that oppose or sustain official institutions.

OW values design cultures, but approaches them without devotion. Instead of celebrating the power of design, it focuses on the power structures that, willingly or not, design reproduces. More than a solution, design itself is a problem and a challenge. OW acknowledges design's intrinsic interdisciplinarity, but we recognize that such quality is not neutral: design cultures have produced reductions and erasures. This is why at OW we humbly relate to other fields of knowledge doing our best to respect their histories and preexisting set of relationships.

Presently, design is not even a buzzword anymore. That might be a good thing. Opposing a generic understanding of design, OW engages instead with generalism, that is, the emancipatory principle according to which the life project of individual and collective subjects shouldn't be

the domain of designerly elites alone. Claiming autonomy is not enough: autonomy is a process that requires cultivation and maintenance.

OW hosts articles, interviews, short essays and all the cultural production that doesn't fit neither the fast-paced, volatile design media promotional machine nor the necessarily slow and lengthy process of scholarly publishing. This way, the hope is to address urgent issues, without sacrificing rigor and depth.

OW is maintained by the Center for Other Worlds (COW), at Lusófona University, Lisbon (PT). COW focuses on the development of perspectives that aren't dominant nor imposed by the design discipline, through criticism, speculation and collaboration with various disciplines such as curating, architecture, visual arts, ecology and political theory, having in design an unifying element but rejecting hierarchies between them.

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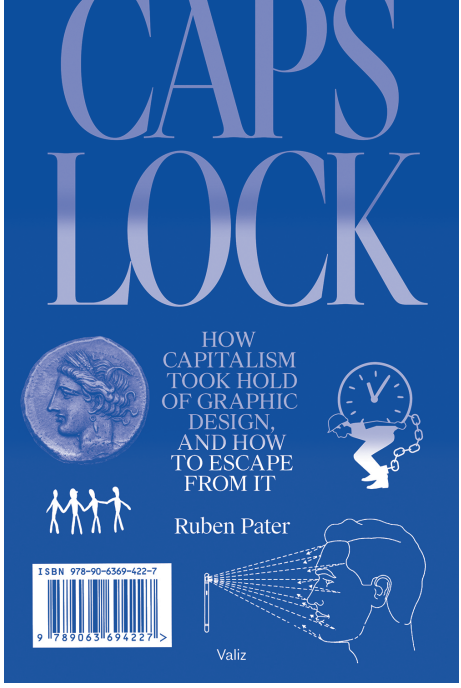
#01 2021, July 5

“The Branding of Bodies” by Ruben Pater

In his new book CAPS LOCK: How Capitalism Took Hold of Graphic Design, and How to Escape From It (available at Valiz Publishers, Dutch designer and writer Ruben Pater uses accessible language and striking visual material to dissect the complex relationships between graphic design and capitalism. Here, we publish, with permission of the author, a shortened version of the chapter ‘The Designer as Brander’.



"Iron instruments fashioned into rather simple printed type became tools of torture." — Simone Browne, author and educator

From the Nike swoosh to the Christian cross, abstract symbols play an important role in human society. Elementary shapes such as the circle, square, triangle, the line, the arrow, and the cross have been found in 35,000-year-old cave drawings on different continents.[1] Historian Yuval Noah Harari mentions sociological research that suggests groups of up to about 150 individuals can exist without symbolic representation. Once a group becomes larger, stories and myths are necessary to establish a social order. Harari cites religions, politics, professions, nation states, social classes, and corporations as examples of such narratives.[2] Branding started with the marking of agricultural property. Workmen in ancient Rome and Egypt left inscriptions of symbols and their

1. Ruben Pater, The Politics of Design (Amsterdam: BIS Publishers), p. 135.
2. Yuval Noah Harari, Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind (London: Vintage UK, 2015), pp. 26--27.

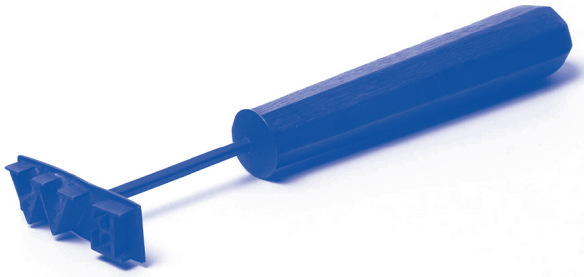
initials at construction sites, discovered thousands of years later. Today it is often the unheard and unseen those who use graffiti tags to leave their mark in public space. Brands were a symbol of identification, but today they have become synonymous with mass-produced commodities. Branding has now come to include all aspects of life, with brands achieving an almost omnipresent and religious status. Nothing can escape branding'; cities, nations, water, air, we are even encouraged to brand ourselves.

Many design studios advertise branding services on their websites saying something like 'We love brands'. But while many designers love brands, some feel uneasy about the relentless barrage of consumption messages that branding inevitably leads to. A discomfort that is no less part of the history of branding, at its most violent.

Branding as Torture

The word branding comes from the ancient Norse word brandr, meaning 'to burn'. One way of marking property was by burning a symbol into the hide of an animal, using a wooden torch called a brand. The word dates back to the early Middle Ages, but the Egyptians branded their livestock five thousand years ago. Livestock wasn't the only living form of property that was branded. David Graeber describes how in ancient Greece, slaves could be freed for a ransom, and they would be branded with the mark of their own currency.[3] Under Roman law, slaves were considered property. Runaway slaves were marked with the letters FGV for fugitivus (fugitive), while robbers were branded with FUR, for fure (thief) into the forehand, legs, and arms.[4]

3. David Graeber, Debt: The First 5000 Years (New York: Melville House, 2011), pp. 188--189.
4. Boris Badenov, "As many enemies as there are slaves: Spartacus and the politics of servile rebellion in the late republic", Libcom.org, 8 June 2010, accessed 17 January 2021.



Branding iron with the letters 'E' and 'W', Latin America, 1877.
Source: © Collection Museum voor Wereldculturen. c.18 cm. TM-H-2978, before 1877. hdl.handle.net/20.500.11840/201347.

Slavery took on an industrial scale during European colonialism, when labour was needed in the colonized territories. Enslaved peoples were branded with a hot iron on the forehead, breast, or arm. The horrifying act of burning an owner's logo into a person as branding is understood by author and educator Simone Browne as both a technology for marketing and for torture.[5] When slaves from the Dutch West India Company (WIC) arrived on the Caribbean island of Curaçao they were branded before being sold. The WIC was one of the first corporations in the world, and already had 'brand' guidelines: "as you purchase slaves you must mark them at the upper right arm with the silver marker CCN, which is sent along with you for that purpose", and then the method of branding itself,

> note the following when you do the branding: (1) the area of marking must first be rubbed with candle wax or oil; (2) The marker should only be as hot as when applied to paper, the paper gets red.[6]

5. Simone Browne, Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), p. 99.
6. Instructions for branding set out by the Middelburgsche Commercie Compagnie, or the Trade Company of Middelburg, a Dutch charter company that later displaced the WIC in slave trading. Quoted from Browne, Dark Matters, p. 99.

The graphic systems for branding slaves signified locations, situations, or owners. Browne explains the branding system of the WIC after 1703:

> The company began to use alphabetic branding irons in an A--Z sequence, with the exception of the letters U and J so as not to be confused with the letters V and I, and the letter O was not used due to the iron being worn down.[7]

John H. Felch and William Riches, branding slaves, c. 1858. Credit: John H. Felch and William Riches. commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Branding_slaves.jpg.

The Barbados Council branded the letter R on the forehead of slaves that set fire to sugarcane fields. In Brazil, runaway slaves were branded with the letter F. It is important to understand this violent part of the history of branding not just as an exceptionally barbarous act, but as a fundamental capitalist strategy. The transatlantic slave trade itself was a capitalist enterprise driven by profit that made industrial capitalism possible.

Industrial Branding

In the craftsman's workshop, the merchant's mark was a personal guarantee of quality by the workshop's master. The invention of the steam engine set in motion industrial production in the late eighteenth century,

7. Ibid., p. 100.

and the market would soon be flooded with identical mass-produced goods. The form of these products revealed little about the people who designed and produced them, and under which circumstances.

To compensate for the absent affinity that craftsmen instilled in their products, designers were hired. They invented narratives, names, and symbols to replace the craftsmen's signature. These were always partly fictional, as the design of packaging and branding wasn't done on the factory floor where the objects were produced. One of the strategies to instil a familiar feeling onto lifeless industrial products was to invent fictional persons. Design theorists Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller write that early industrial brands "replaced the local shopkeeper as the interface between consumer and product".[8] This is why the brands for generic foods were folksy and family-like: Campbell's Soup, Uncle Ben's, Aunt Jemima, and Quaker Oats. A lot of these early advertising ideas can still be found today, as brands create brand personalities as a substitute for human relationships. By using a consistent way of speaking, informal language, and friendly imagery, brands make us associate a product with a person.

The grocer's, from a Dutch school teaching aid. Most items are sold brandless in bulk quantities. Credit: Illustration Josef Hoevenaar. Via Boekwinkeltjes.nl.

8. Ellen Lupton and J. Abbott Miller, Design, Writing, Research: Writing on Graphic Design (London: Phaidon Press, 1999), p. 177.

Overproduction under capitalism requires aggressive methods to sell the surplus of products. Branding is one of them, as it has become a promotional vehicle that disconnects the conditions of actual production, the workers, and the materials, from how products are sold. "It has been the very business of the advertising industry to distance products from the factories that make them", writes Naomi Klein.[9]

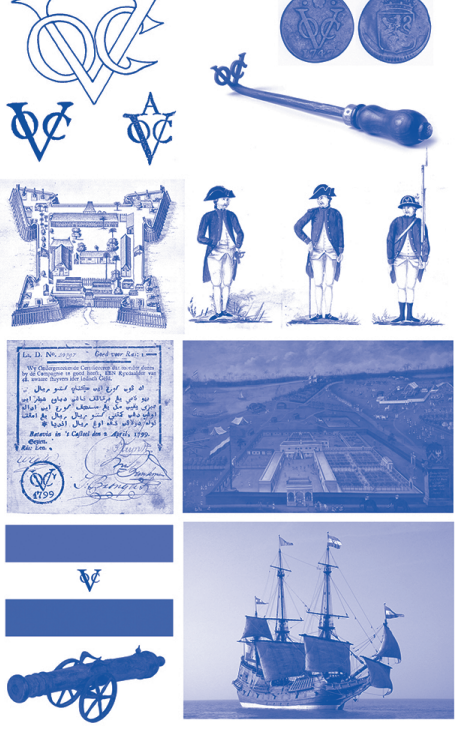
To a large extent, the workers who actually assemble or make the products have no influence on how these are communicated and branded. This is done as far away as possible, to enable designers to develop fictional narratives for the purpose of selling the product independent of its material quality and origin. Copywriter Helen Woodward started her advertising career in 1907 and said:

> if you are advertising any product, never see the factory in which it was made.... Don't watch the people at work ... because, you see, when you know the truth about anything, the real inner truth --- it is very hard to write the surface fluff which sells it.[10]

Corporate Identity

The first for-profit corporations were established in Europe during colonialism. Governments could not afford to back the risky, but highly profitable sea journeys, so they created joint-stock companies that could attract money from investors. The enormous profits that were made in the slave trade as well as from colonial extraction and exploitation were the conditions under which the corporate form emerged. Among these first chartered multinational corporations were The Dutch East India Company, the Dutch West India Company, the British East India Company, and the Hudson's Bay Company.

9. Naomi Klein, No Logo (New York: Picador, 2010), p. 249.
10. Ibid., p. 345



The first corporate identity and the first multinational, the Dutch East India Company, 1602–1799. Credit: Compiled from various sources by Ruben Pater.

The Dutch East India Company, Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie (VOC), was one of these first corporations. It was founded in 1602 as a merger between competing shipping companies and it was decided that incorporating them would increase profits. The VOC had a fleet of 4,700 ships, its own army, fortresses, colonial settlements, and even minted its own coins. To communicate its power across continents, it created what might be the first corporate identity. VOC logos were emblazoned on stock, documents, books, maps, coins, flags, cannons, and even on branding irons used on slaves. The colonial armies of the VOC engaged in torture and terror, and for the indigenous populations the corporate identity had "become a sign of murder, torture and dispossession from their lands".[11] For centuries, European colonial corporations reigned

11. Charles Zuber, "The Logo That Lasted", Design Online, 2017, accessed 18 January 2021

supreme, and the VOC is estimated to have been the most valuable company in history, with an estimated worth of $7.8 trillion today.[12]

We Love Brands

Branding began literally as a weapon of torture, intended to dehumanize people by subjugating them into becoming objects for sale. We are also reminded of the uneasiness of advertisers with industrial production, who did not want to see the horrible circumstances under which products were made, as it would make it impossible to write the copy to sell them.

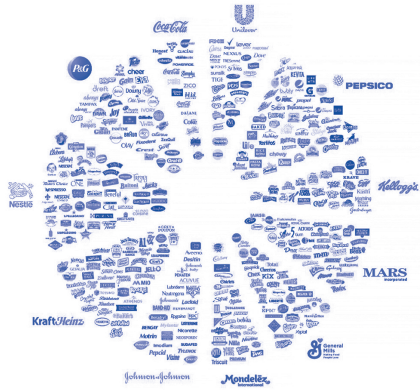
In the design press, discussions around branding are usually limited to evaluating the redesign of corporate identities, preceded by heated discussions on the Brand New website. Discussing the design of a logo is perhaps amusing, but has little to do with the role that branding plays in our economic system. Brands are one of the ways in which designers fuel the continuous consumption of goods, and how every part of society is commodified. Even a well-designed brand for a museum still uses the same logic of branding to sell more tickets, more merchandise, to increase visibility, to make more profit, perpetuating the narrative that everything needs branding. Designers cannot claim ignorance and externalize all ethics to the client. The partners of Chermayeff & Geismar --- who branded oil companies, banks, and pharmaceutical companies --- explain their view on corporate identity design as follows in Printmag:

> When we create a great logo for an environmental organization, we do not see ourselves as saving the planet. In the same way, we cannot take responsibility for the 'evil' actions of corporations we brand.[13]

12. Ned Dymoke, "5 of the Richest Companies in History", The Big Think, 17 October 2018.
13. Aaron Kenedi, 'Marks Men: An Interview with Ivan Chermayeff, Tom Geismar, and Sagi Haviv of Chermayeff & Geisma', Printmag, 14 September 2011, accessed 18 January 2021.

Unbranding

Using symbols to signify a product's origin has its uses, as it has been done historically. Branding to simply mark a product or service is useful, but if we would limit branding to its functional qualities, the majority of brands would disappear instantly. Designers' automatic response is to simply put the logo on every imaginable product, and to display it as often as possible. The process of enclosure of the commons in society, where shared spaces available to everyone that aren't privately owned are seized and sold off, from healthcare, to housing, to nature, often happens through branding.



The products in supermarkets give the perception of unlimited choice. But a closer look reveals most brands are owned by a eleven companies, who often compete with their own brands. Source: reddit.com

We should be reminded how graphic design has turned our streets into an architecture of billboards, and our media platforms into a banner paradise. Branding shows that capitalism sees everything as a product, and every social encounter as a sales opportunity. Graphic designers can play an important role in refusing that logic. To not treat every design job as a branding opportunity, and to take our responsibility to stop turning all aspects of our daily environment into products.

#02 2021, July 19

“Design for Obsolete Devices” by Anaëlle Beignon

French designer Anaëlle Beignon recently graduated from the Interaction Design department of Malmö University. In this excerpt from her master thesis, Beignon shows how obsolescence is not just an internal quality of a device, but a dimension that emerges from the relation between such device and the broader sociotechnical ecosystem.

"My computer is too old, I'll have to change it soon."

This sentence may make sense, but how did "old" become a synonym for unusable? "Old" in this context could refer to a degradation of the performances of the device (speed, battery, etc), but it can also refer to difficulties that occur from living with a device that does not fit anymore its environment (compatibility, features, etc). Why is it so hard for "old" and "new" technologies to co-exist?

This short article focuses on the process by which a technological device becomes old, obsolete. My main argument is that obsolescence does not only refer to objects that break earlier than expected. In a lot of cases, obsolescence is triggered by external changes in a world in which things are connected: when one evolves the others have to evolve as well.
I propose to reconsider the concept of obsolescence from the perspective of the tech industry's agency on the ageing of well-working products. Being myself a designer, I reflect on my responsibility in the making of obsolete products and present alternative approaches of envisioning technological development.

Background of the Term 'Obsolescence'

The history of the term 'obsolescence' starts with the concept of 'planned obsolescence', first described by the real estate broker Bernard Londonin 1932 in his article "Ending the Depression Through Planned Obsolescence" where he argues for planned obsolescence as a way of fostering economical growth by pushing society to produce and consume more products in the context of the Great Depression.

> I would have the Government assign a lease of life to shoes and homes and machines, to all products of manufacture, mining and agriculture, when they are first created, and they would be sold

> and used within the term of their existence definitely known by the consumer. After the allotted time had expired, these things would be legally "dead" and would be controlled by the duly appointed governmental agency and destroyed if there is widespread unemployment. New products would constantly be pouring forth from the factories and marketplaces, to take the place of the obsolete, and the wheels of industry would be kept going and employment regularized and assured for the masses."

This idea of obsolescence as the normal course of things (commercial goods become too old and should be replaced) is strictly related to the way of envisioning consumption of goods and services in a capitalist society. In his dissertation, Kristoffer Gansing (2013) states that technological evolution is based on the production of obsolescence. He links this linear vision of the development and replacement of technologies to the Schumpeterian concept of creative destruction, where the replacement of old technologies by new ones is a persistent process under capitalism. This would later be called 'radical innovation'. In reaction to this linear conception of technological progress, Gansing argues for a network view grounded on the cultural aspect of how technology is practised and performed at a given time. The normativity of technological evolution is therefore challenged with what he calls "heretic counter-practices and strategies". Nonetheless, this linear vision of progress is still dominant, and the constant making of obsolescence has become the norm.

The Anthropologist Julia Watson documented indigenous knowledge and practices in order to rethink the dominant understanding of innovation and technology. The picture shows a 'living root bridge' which can be found in Meghalaya, India. Credits: picture by Pete Oxford, from Julia Watson's *Design by Radical Indigenism* (2020).

Socio-Cultural Aspects of Obsolescence

Consumer behaviour is generally presented as having a major impact on obsolescence (Cooper, 2010). People are urged to keep objects for longer for the reason that they could be considered responsible for discarding functional products for better ones. Users can choose which technology they want to use or not but their willpower is constrained by their social, cultural and economical environment. Therefore, factors such as the cost of good quality products, access to public services available with a smartphone, or the social networks used by their relatives to communicate will all have an impact on the life span of a phone. Choices will be made according to which functions such device can fulfill and what are the needs and aspirations of its owner.

In a 2008 qualitative study on the lifespan of phones, Elaine Huang and Khai Truong had already identified the reasons for replacing devices that were still functioning properly. The main reason was economical (a discount, or the renewal of their contract), the second one was the desire for more features and functionalities. Only then came the replacement of phones because of a breakdown or dysfunction. This example significantly illustrates the impact of the context over the breakdown of the object as a motive of replacement.

These external reasons that push users into changing their devices can be connected to the notion of "premature ageing" coined by the design activist Matteo Zallio and HCI researcher Damon Berry in 2017.It relates to

hardware malfunctions (for example the accelerated ageing of batteries), but also by a consumerist society that leads to a premature replacement of well-working products. This aspect is particularly linked to Huang and Truong's research outcome about the significant influence of two-years phone contracts on the frequency at which people change their phones, which generally happens when they renewing their contract.

'Premature ageing' reframes obsolescence as a process drawn by external causes and not just by a predefined life cycle of the object. Therefore, when speaking of obsolescence, the different forces that produce it in a given context are indivisible from the properties of the device itself. In other words, electronic devices become obsolete because of the technological, social and cultural environment around them. Aspects such as a government's decision to limit access to public services only to latter devices will play a role in the obsoletion process of older devices that are not supported anymore by the service.

Design Approaches to Systemic Obsolescence

Within design, various approaches have been taken to respond to the normalized production of obsolescence. Various angles on the end life of digital products have been documented from different parts of an objects' lifespan: from the object's conception to the extension of the object's life. There is also another level that goes beyond the object itself and related to an individual and societal scale: prevention.

In an ethnographic study of hackerspaces, fablabs and repair shops, Nicolas Nova argues that all these places could be compared to laboratories where situated knowledge about the manipulated technology is produced. In this context, we discover other ways of caring for electronic devices and rethinking end-of-life scenarios. Taking into account existing systems and skills that already exist, it is possible to make changes in the

perception of the obsolete. However, repair cannot completely challenge the obsoletion processes as repairing an electronic device means taking the risk to spend money on an object that might not be compatible with essential services in the next months or years.

Storefront of a mobile repair shop. Source: https://www.hesge.ch/head/projet/mobile-repair-cultures-reparation-informelle-linnovation-silencieuse-cas-des-smartphones. Credits: HEAD -- Genève.

Steven J. Jackson (2014) examined the infrastructures underlying disruptions in the conventional life-cycle of an object in a consumerist society (purchase, use, discard). He coined the term 'Broken world thinking', a perspective on the fragility of the world we live in and how it is being constantly creatively restored. It is a critical vision of technological innovation, as it focuses on the constant maintenance efforts rather than on an idea of linear progress. Nonetheless, it has been criticized in Linda Hilfing Ritasdatter's thesis dissertation (2019) as being a western-centred vision of the world enounced in the 'broken world thinking' expression.

> Isn't the "world" of "broken-world thinking" tightly connected to a specifically Western understanding of "world" as un-broken, that is, a flow of flawlessly running systems and processes? Albeit one where the one engaging in "broken-world thinking" realizes

> that this stability is not ontological to the systems, but rather continuously enacted through invisible repair and maintenance.

Ritasdatter interrogates the fluidity of occidental lives, and how what might be considered hidden or invisible comes actually from the privileged position one can speak from. It is important for practitioners to be clear on the perspective they adopt on a certain topic. In the case of obsolescence, a simple opposition between the normative up-to-date world pushed by the industry and obsolete world made of old objects would be reducing the view on the topic to a privileged gaze. Instead, we should acknowledge that different realities exist when we take the world as a scope, and that pushing a vision of obsolete technologies being completely forgotten would mask the areas of the world where the use of these same technologies would be the norm.

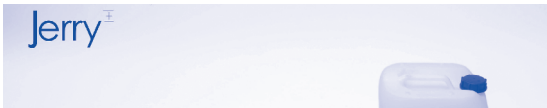
The direction I am taking for my work is towards an understanding of technology as vernacular to subvert the hegemonic vision of it. Approaches questioning the end life of objects in more unconventional ways have also been of great inspiration for my thesis as they come to the point of challenging the mediums for designing.

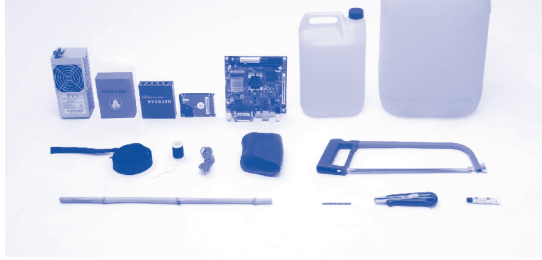
This is particularly explicit in Hertz and Parikka's work on 'Zombie Media' (2012), a notion opposed to that of 'dead media' and critical of the planned obsolescence of technological objects. This approach consists of repurposing and diverting obsolete devices by reactivating them in creative ways. They propose 'circuit bending', a practice invented by the artist Reed Ghazala, which consists of modifying the electronic circuit of everyday objects in order to give them new behaviours. Nonetheless, the finality of circuit bending designs is to carry a critique of the forces that create 'dead media', more than the actual possibility for these 'zombies' to find their place again in people's lives other than in museums.

The Dead Minitel Orchestra is a collective that produces performances with circuit-bended Minitels (obsolete computers from the 80's). Source: https://minitel.re/.

Other more pragmatic propositions exist, such as Will Odom's (2009) 'objects that improve over time'. Odom focuses on the temporality by which we built our relation to digital objects. This approach is closely related to the emotional bonds that we create with objects and explores ways for technologies to subsist in time. Here, the causes of bsolescence are taken into consideration in the design of objects with the intent of re-thinking the consumption of objects outside the scope of trends.

Another interesting approach is Cristiano Storni's (2014) suggestion to empower the user by keeping visible the traces of construction of the devices to make it easier for the users to appropriate them. The emphasis here is not anymore on an emotional motivation to keep an object, but on education to the technologies we own. This would be an opportunity for emancipating ourselves from technological objects that can't be understood, repaired or maintained because they are designed as black boxes. This critique meets the argument of the Austrian philosopher Ivan Illich (1973) when he presents convivial tools as fostering the autonomy of the one who uses them.





Jerry is a computer built from scratch with the minimum amount of material possible. It is made out of a jerrycan, an object that can be easily found in developed countries. Source: https://youandjerrycan.org/

Miles Park (2010) proposes different ways for 'defying obsolescence' that are drawn upon examples of products, behaviours and societal factors. He mostly talks from a product designer's point of view, which therefore includes digital devices but does is not confined to them Among other proposals, he presents 'piggybacking' as a way of adding another device to the existing one that cannot fulfill its function anymore to sustain its use for a longer time. The example taken by the author is 'set-top boxes' for analogue television sets to extend the potential uses one can make of them by enabling access to digital broadcasting services. This example takes into consideration connections with other devices and actors from different generations.

The Digital Slide Viewer, part of a series of artifacts designed by Will Odom, explores how digital materials can be transmitted between generations in a future when the picture's format is not supported anymore by the current technologies. Source: http://willodom.com/portfolio/portfolio/technology-heirlooms/.

One object on its own will difficultly challenge obsoletion processes simply because obsolescence is not just about individual objects, technologies and devices, but embedded in complex systems. This is an interesting orientation for designing with new technologies: instead of assuming that users will upgrade their hardware equipment as new things arrive on the market, it is important to take into consideration what people actually have access to.

Next Steps

For designers, rethinking obsolescence means rethinking our idea of technological innovation. The designation of certain technologies as "obsolete" is pushed by the dominant vision of the technology industry, which profits economically from the constant replacement of goods. For ecological and social matters, this dynamic should be challenged with initiatives that do not consider old products as outdated, because even if the industry decides so, people might still be using them in the meantime. How we value a technology over another is related to how we value their users. If we forget to design for a certain type of technology, then we also forget to design for their users.

This framing of the question of obsolescence is an opportunity and an invitation for anyone having agency in the conception of digital services and related products to care for the obsolete. As an exploration, I researched the implications of it regarding the digitalization of public services in my master thesis, with a focus on software compatibility and physical public infrastructures in Sweden. It reflects further on the marginalization of the users of obsolete devices who are indirectly expected to buy new digital products in order to access public transportation or public healthcare.

Designing for obsolete devices is a strategy for considering differently products and people that are currently not the priority of the industry,

and I believe that a critical understanding of obsolescence can open a lot of new directions for designers from all design fields.

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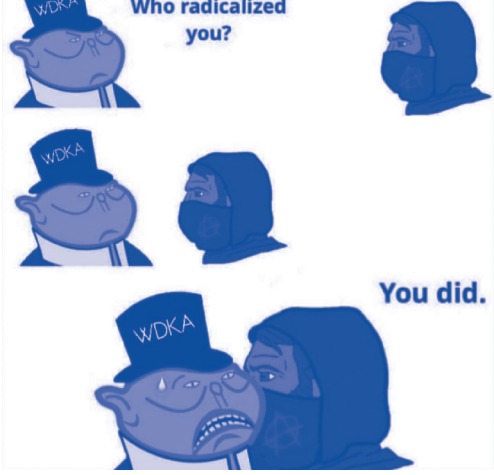
#03 2021, July 26

“May the Bridges We Burn Light the Way”: Five Questions to a Dutch Design School’s Meme Page

An interview between Silvio Lorusso and @wdka.teachermemes



During the last year or two, an informal network of Instagram accounts linked to specific institutions began to populate the infosphere of Dutch art and design education. By means of memes, inside jokes, informative posts and critical declarations, these spaces, generally run by anonymous students or teachers, have maintained — if not produced — a sense of belonging in a time when the schools' sense of community was jeopardized by the pandemic. Thanks to a frank and straightforward language, they counterbalanced the "soft managerialist" style of much official communication, often detached or condescending. These accounts did the work of "reading of the room". They also manifested the daily reality of institutional life, which involves Kafkaesque tasks and unpaid work. Needless to say, this activity caused friction: the call-out of unwanted behavior generated tensions and certain people felt personally attacked.

These meme pages do not only interact on a regional scale, but also on an international one. By doing so, they connect the struggles happening in different hubs of art & design higher education. For instance, some of these accounts stood in solidarity with London students who refused to pay high tuition fees when their education was transferred online.

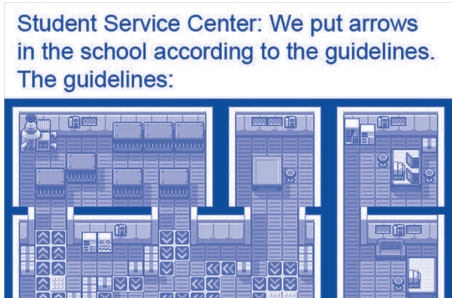
From this perspective, Dutch design school meme pages represent an authentic instance of what Ezio Manzini calls "cosmopolitan localism"

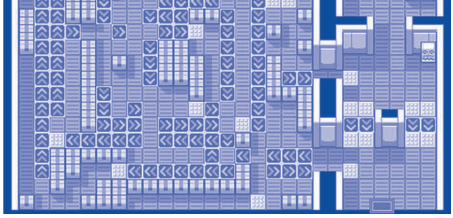
as they clearly show that "small is not small" and that "local is not local". Fascinated by this phenomenon, I got in touch with the admin of @wdka.teachermemes to ask them a few questions about their relationship with institutional critique, meme culture and the Dutch art and design scene.

SL: Let's start from the basics. @wdka.teachermemes is an Instagram account started in 2020. It is unofficially linked to the Willem de Kooning Academie of Rotterdam. It consists of more than one yearof daily memes: obscure institution-specific references and acronyms, sharp commentary on the troubled relationship between the Dutch art institutions and decoloniality, jokes about artistic quote-unquote autonomy, relatable rants about Microsoft Teams, and finally an active role in fighting the organization's decision to censor a banner in solidarity with the Palestinian people put up by a group of students. What is, really, @wdka.teachermemes? Or, better, what has it become?

WTM: @wdka.teachermemes is an affective wormhole into community within decidedly uncommunal institutional confines.

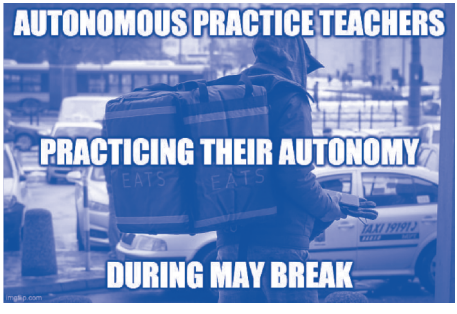
It pierces the outer sac-membrane of the institution (or its scorched outer crust) to arrive at the quivering flesh that lies underneath, a mass of teachers, students, and other ministrators who are bound together by a common struggle, a common comedy. This flesh writhes in precarious discomfort, searching for padded places to air grievances.
Its coin of exchange for finding solace is the info-token, the trade secret, which is to say: gossip. This is the bulk of what we traffic.





It is a bulletin board and academic calendar where you can find gentle reminders of what season of the school year it is—second term grading season, Open Day, Drive and Development Week… It's also a place where inscrutable official email "communiqués" are digested into plain speech and salient bullet points are highlighted, e.g., the fact that a 200 EUR bonus was given to teachers for home office upgrading soon after the pandemic hit. Communiqués are obtuse and frustrating, not everyone reads them and important memos are often missed.

It is a classroom in the DMs, as we give serious feedback and running advice to "ghost pupils" trying to do school projects on memetics but finding little concrete knowledge/encouragement on the matter in their classrooms.



Also important: It is a sleeper cell for school body mobilization in the face of institutional oppression, as you already noted. This last role smuggles applied knowledge from online political propaganda.We mimicked the strategy of honeypot accounts that start off as innocuous kitteh meme

pages or whatever, building a follower base attracted by sweet viral content. When a critical mass of followers is reached or a political emergency takes place, these false-front purveyors of interwebbed entertainment pivot their content to whatever political messaging is required. Quite by accident (or maybe, let's give ourselves some credit, through embodied knowledge and muscle memory), @wdka.teachermemes became such an account, providing information on BLM protests last year, supporting the work of other accounts and brave humans during Andeweggate, and then becoming a full-on "media partner" and logistical supporter of a student protest against violence in Palestine. Shout out to @diana.al.halabi, one of our memetic activism idols and the driving force behind the Holding Palestine banner protest we helped amplify.

Most importantly: It is a coping mechanism for stress, a place for us to survive the institution. Driven to breaking points by infantilization, patriarchy, crypto- or exo-racism, the tyranny of structurelessness, the viciousness of mediocrity threatened, and other assorted indignities, @wdka.teachermemes has been for us an antidote to burnout, which sometimes seems like a psychological luxury that exists mostly in the Global North.

@wdka.teachermemes burns as many bridges as it builds. As Dylan McKay from Beverly Hills 90201 (played by Luke Perry) once said, "May the bridges I burn light the way." To our chagrin, Vetements has turned this iconic unit of popular philosophy into a sweatshirt. I don't know what it is about Vetements that irks us so. Perhaps the fact that they've made a fortune out of memetic forms, peddling them to the wealthy and flexxers, hollowing these emotional units of their raw authenticity. There should be a revolutionary cap on the income that one is allowed to make from memes, unless one is the unwitting, non-consensual subject of them—here thinking of, I dunno, smiling old guy meme guy? We digress.

where im spending that 200EUR bonus 4 home office improvement
Take your laptop off your lap and walk around with it!
STAND
LAPTOP COMPUTER HARNESS
SECURE, MOBILE, COMFORTABLE, EASY ON AND OFF
Easy installation.
No modification of laptop required.

SL: If you mean Harold from Hide The Pain Harold, he seems to be able to capitalize pretty well from the meme… I could go on and on about him, but let's keep the focus on the local context. As an admin of a school meme page you might possess a privileged point of view on the state of the art of Dutch culture and education, as you are able to reach those actors who rarely make the news, the journals or the conferences, namely, staff and students; the people behind the projects. What do you see?

WTM: Yeah, right, we thought Hide The Pain Harold's name was Carl for some reason. It's actually András Arató, IRL…

We're glad you frame this vantage point as privileged. Perhaps we need to tell ourselves that more, that there is power in peering through peepholes.

We see exhaustion, mostly. We see, or rather we feel, emotions. Our own, those of others. In conversation with our regular viewers and other para-institutional meme runners, we have noted a common thread: the need to express emotions that are deemed improper in public meatspace and thus require an outlet in disembodied agoras. So mostly, more than

seeing, because we do not see much from our digital cave, we feel our way through the body public and body politic, like moles digging with our nose--hearts to find air and light.

There is also a preoccupation with propriety that is negotiated (or bucked entirely) when creating these memes. We feel quite a bit of resistance to the memetic form because it is deemed savage, not fitting with expectations of what is socially acceptable, especially within a culture that prizes discretion and uniformity. Because these accounts do not repress emotions, they are classified as unserious, unworthy of dignified attention. The resistance comes not just from the high cupulas of administration and management and the high brows of academia, but from the factory floor as well. To expect the workforce, the sausage makers, the heavy machine handlers of arts education to all be liberated from their chains is disingenuous. What vexes the most is this resistance from the floor itself, from those who would be your comrades in arms.

We feel resistance to the key of humor and informal register. As if, because we laugh from our bellies and speak from the hip in the face

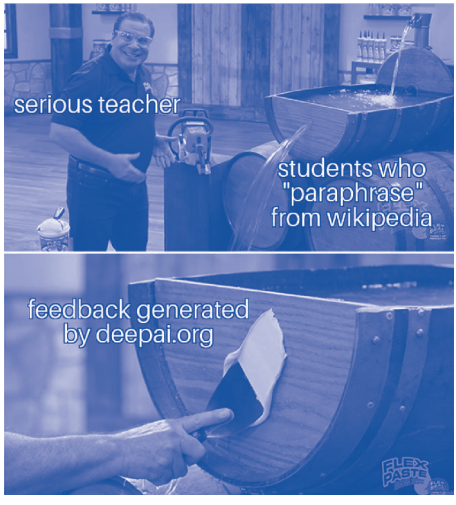
of the toxic fumes of neoliberal exploitation, we are not capable of high intellectual thought. We feel there is resistance to any act that makes the body—and its corresponding humours—evident.

We hear (because when we read DMs, we hear the words as voices in our heads) a lot of exhaustion, as we mentioned earlier. People are tired to the root. They are tired of being cast aside, condescended to, harassed, sexually and racially discriminated, stereotyped. They are tired of the expectation to work above their paygrades and beyond their by-the-hour fees. They are tired of the mediocre boys club. They are tired of white lady tears moving mountains so quickly and other-color cries being ignored for decades.

We hear anger. We don't know if they are angry because they are tired or if they are tired because they are angry.

We feel joy. The joy of discovering previously unknown allies. The joy of laughing together at jokes we did not know we shared. The joy of finding, in these nooks and crannies of the institution, ways to smuggle gifts and support to each other.

We feel hope. We know hope is not fashionable with fancy "critical" folk. We DGAF. It is in these extruded digital corners where we see how institutions should be working together. But they (meaning, the people within the institutions, who are, collectively, the flesh and mortar of the institution itself) are terribly afraid of hope. Because to hope is to commit to change. And change is effortful. And not everyone has the gumption for doing the work that needs to be done.



It's difficult to critique the waned capacity for hard labor in developed countries without sounding like a lean-in feminist or Nietzschean alphamale. But we will try. Perhaps we should remember that, while REST is indeed part of the work and we should fight for unperturbed leisure time, the norm in many other countries is a 5 or even 6 day work week. We are grateful for the humane possibility in the Netherlands of surviving quite comfortably (for our standards, as we don't need much) on 2 to 3 days of teaching work, but we would like to remind our colleagues that this is not the norm. This is a luxury. How to redistribute this comfort? How to build a muscle for the labor that change requires? How to remember that a fully paid burnout leave is a privilege that must be used wisely? Like, is it ok to cash in this privilege and conveniently burn out for 6-8 months, as a white

or male or otherwise privileged teacher, after you are called out for being racist towards a student or abusive towards a colleague? Note: Let it be known that we are not assuming privilege is only apportioned amongst the whiteciseuromale. Alterity ≠ sainthood.

Me: *shows willingness to do emotional labor*
Everyone's unresolved ego injuries from every single bad encounter ever:
Bonjour

SL: This line of critique seems also what unites the various Dutch design meme pages. I see a lively exchange happening between them. Does this relationship only involve the public posts and comments? Or do you discuss privately? Also, do you think that this network of pages revealsa sort of a decentralization of institutional affiliation? After all, given the tiny contracts of most teachers (a theme frequently present in your memes), several of them work for more than one institution. In this way, a shared set concerns and a common sense of humor are spread. Is competition among schools, epitomized by the final show week, a thing of the past?

WTM: Regarding the exchange: OH YES. There is a healthy and friendly backchannel between accounts, in our experience at least. So far, we haven't noted any competition between inter-para-institutional accounts, but we have, in conversations with other meme runners, noted some intra-para-institutional competitive behavior, for example between accounts inside the same school. Though as @wdka.teachermemes,we get along just fine with our student meme predecessor @wdkamemes In fact,

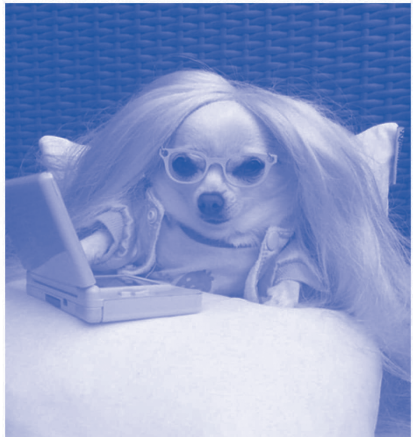
we openly admit to @wdkamemes being part of the inspiration for us starting our own memetic activity. It does seem logical that turf wars would emerge inside closely co-habitated terrains, especially since we are dealing with art world/design education, which indoctrinates competition, cult to the ego, and generalized suspicion as forms of architecting one's coolness <---- vital to success in the market <---- contingent to popularity in social circles.

Thinking about inter-para-school memetic relationships, extra-institutional amplification is something that meme runners seem to cherish and desire. Speaking for ourselves: Seeing our internal struggles at Hogeschool Rotterdam/Willem de Kooning Academy/Piet Zwart Institute echoed in other places has been gratifying. As we do not perceive enough change within our own walls, it's hypermotivating to see our discourse at least gaining traction elsewhere. For these and other reasons we probably know nothing about (because who can know the internal workings of another fleshbody), the inter-para-school backchanneling has been quite full of gratitude, sometimes expressed in thank-yous and sometimes expressed by reposting and cross-tagging and referencing each other's content.

As for centralization, it is a mirage. The Netherlands is a tiny country. This means there are only so many teachers to go round, and as you mention, many of us have to hustle at multiple institutions to make rent and raise our kids and feed our cultural practices. Same goes for management. There are meetings between schools to align on things such as diversity or

financial guidelines. Furthermore, many of the schools are nested within each other. The social circles and professional circuits amongst students and teachers are also closely linked outside of the classroom.

jitsibae is never pixelated because all wifi respecc her and make her shine



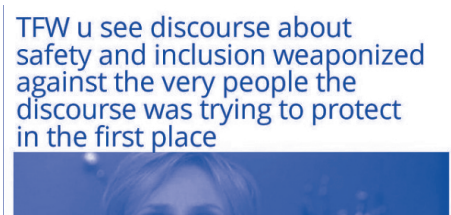
Perhaps the fact that we are all, as art school meme runners, using the same technological platform (Instagram)—with its embedded communications system—makes a communal atmosphere manifest more easily. It's also an informal platform that allows for communicating as people and not as institutions via letterhead stationery or obtuse multiple-recipient emails. When you can speak in human vernacular instead of a language that calls to mind the architecture of brick-and-mortar structures, the buildings themselves, which occupy giant swathes of cities and house so many souls… it's easier to make connections and decentralize loyalties and prides. Thinking of pride as in proud but also prides as in groups of lions. We digress.

It's so unwieldy, this language of an architecture built to hold so many bodies, more than is advisable for the size of the land upon which these

phalluses are erected. You cannot speak freely when you feel you must represent so many. (Jury's out as to whether representing the views of everyone in a school body is better than representing the discourse your curriculum purportedly cleaves to.) DMs, comment feeds, heart buttons circumvent that linguistic architecture with the illusion of one-on-one intimacy. It's an illusion because you actually don't know how many people are running a particular account. In our dealings, we have discovered that most of the para-institutional meme accounts are collectively maintained.

SL: A few years ago the design world discovered memes. What followed was cringe. Designers applied their typical top-bottom design approach to the new medium: how can we harness the power of memes? how can we use our expertise to forge viral memes? how can we do "proper" memes? Unsurprisingly, designers' memes were clumsy and just not funny. And yet, meme culture lives on. How do you see the relationship between visual design and meme culture? Can there ever be a bridge? Or does the vitality of the latter show the rigor mortis of the former?

WTM: Meet the landscape where it is and care for its health. Meaning, don't cut the tree of popular aesthetics to put it in your desktop diorama of climate-controlled ennui. Leave it as is, where you found it. Or harvest it wisely, cutting the bark (as aesthetics is but the crust through which cultural lifeblood flows) only halfway round the trunk, in a broken ring. If you harvest tree bark by cutting a ring completely around the trunk's wood core, you will kill the tree. Think of the visual culture that you harvest as leaving a wound that endangers the life of a host culture. Sorry for being so abstract, it's a bit liberating to be interviewed as a digital avatar. It invites our mediocre poet to crawl out of the shadow.

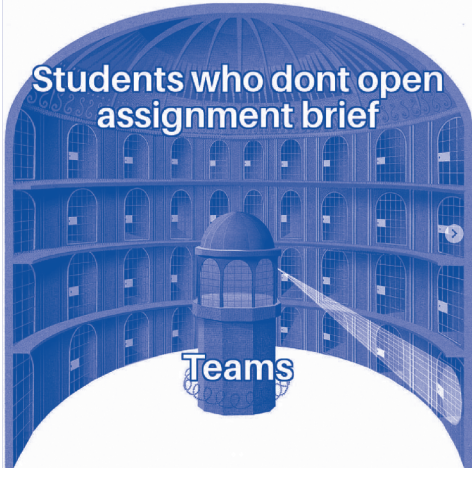

TFW u see discourse about
safety and inclusion weaponized
against the very people the
discourse was trying to protect
in the first place

In terms of top-bottom design: Be a power-bottom (or ultra-vers) girl in this alpha-top world.

Harness the power of memes by recognizing that, as Andrew Breitbart once said, politics is downstream from culture.

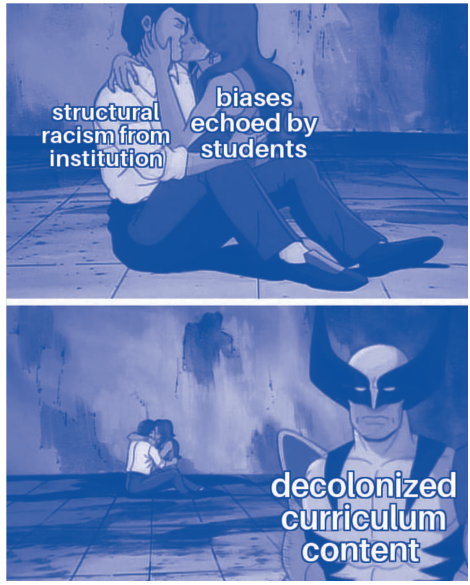
Memes are a tremendously mobile, succinct, and effective way to shepherd affect. Emotions are litmus.

There is no way really to forge viral memes on purpose-purpose. Its trial and error, for the most part. So try. And err. Mistakes and their rectificationsare a portal to heuristic discovery.



As for vitality (resulting from libido - erotic life drive) versus rigor mortis (the fruition of morbido - destructive death drive): We like to think of

bloodletting and vampires. How we can we share our heritage, humor and joy, blood-nourishment, tumescent abundance amongst each other? For those who suck—as for those who harvest tree bark—curb the hunger, no matter how desperate you are for salvation/feedback/ideas/meaning/love/guidance/community. For those who are strong enough to let blood, close your eyes, deeply listen. It's difficult but entirely possible to hear your own pulse above the din of everyone else's ecstatic, grotesque, pathetic (as in sad) suckling. You must pull away from the vampires when you can no longer hear your own heart. Also, remember to eat healthy. So that you may continue to nurse those whom hunger has turned wretched.



SL: If I'm correct, @wdka.teachermemes is involved in an unofficial summer school called SoMeMeR uNSCHooL? Will this be some sort of coming out? How does it differ from other design summer schools?

WTM: @somemerunschool is not an admin reveal, by any means. We will be participating anonymously (or more precisely, pseudonymously) in SoMeMeR uNSCHooL's keynote panel discussion. Because who says

keynotes must only be delivered by individual genius types spewing out lectures? From what we know, SoMeMeR's curriculum does not tackle design per se but rather focuses on the field of memetics. It is different from design summer schools we have been to as it is quite local in scope and very specific to the context of political activism in Dutch institutions — with a few very welcome outlier participants, 100% endogamy is boring. We are relieved that there is no colonial impulse to travel to exotic landscapes to mine information/aesthetics for application to privileged spheres of design in one's home country. This extractivism is euphemized into "nomadism" in other curriculums. There is also no tuition fee. Beyond that, SoMeMeR has a clear policy of cultural remittance. We have been informed that a large chunk of the "artist" fees for the organizers have been redirected to two other para-schools in the Philippines. We support SoMeMeR's acknowledgement of the fact that cultural production from a colonial seat cannot claim decoloniality unless it engages in (economic) redress and restitution. Any attempt at decolonial cultural production from the center must actively redistribute resources to ex-colonial (or still--colonized) territories, historically stripped of their land resources to fund luxury (and luxury socialism) in the West, or the Global North, or the developed world, or the First World, however you wanna call this cultural Disneyland we somehow got tickets to.

#04 2021,October 4

“Design and Power - Part 1" by Silvio Lorusso

In this contribution, Silvio Lorusso examines various ways in which designers have conceptualized, expressed and exerted their power. Furthermore, he looks at how such power overlaps with notions of authority, hierarchy, prestige, responsibility and ethics. The goal is to provide a specific set of categories to map the power relationships in which the field of design operates beyond both subjectivism and determinism. On the 27th of September, Lorusso presented this work at the Museum of Art, Architecture and Technology of Lisbon and discussed it with design critic Francisco Laranjo, director of the Center for Other Worlds.

Tweet by Billy Fleming (@JooBilly).

> But is there still room for design? Frankly, it is very small. — Tomás Maldonado, 1970[1]

Mass-Produced Impact

A traditional view of power in design sees designers changing the world through the things they design: products, services, systems, environments, tools, machines. By designing the artifacts that make up our artificial world, they contribute to make the world more and more artificial, and, it seems, inescapably so. At the beginning of the twentieth century, in the culminating phase of industrial production and mass communication, the link between cause (design) and effect (world changes) was particularly tangible since its scale was colossal. Armies of identical artifacts would enter the life of the masses for a relatively long time. The slightest design change would suddenly readjust the operations of this mechanically--reproduced battalion of things. The designer could think of themselves as a commander whose designerly 'orders' would be executed en masse, in line with Weber's definition of power, namely, "the possibility to find obedience to a command."[2] A modern perspective on production implied a modern understanding of design's power. "One design for all" wasn't just

1 Maldonado, Tomás. 1970. La speranza progettuale. Torino: Einaudi, p. 76. Translated by the author.
2 Weber, Max. 2019. Typen der Herrschaft. Ditzingen: Reclam, p. 7. Weber uses the word Herrschaft, a term covering a vast semantic field including notions of authority, rule, dominion,power, etc.

a technical necessity but a programmatic ambition. Consider, for instance, Henry Ford's faith in a universal car, the T model. In 1922, the same year when Weber offered his definition of power, Ford expressed his deliberate intention to "build a motor car for the great multitude."[3]

Interior of the Ford works, Trafford Park, Manchester, c1911-c1927. Photographer unknown.

We haven't seen the sunset of standardized production yet. Most of the things we purchase and use are still mass-produced. Furthermore, if we take digital services into account we have to admit that an entirely new dimension of mass production has emerged. One where segments of this mass are relentlessly sieved by means of quick cycles of test and implementation, one where an interface change on a platform used by the millions, instantly deployed, can have monumental consequences. But how common is it for a designer to work on such level? Pretty rare. Only a handful of designers have access to the prototyping rooms of these massively used products.[4] The majority of them will likely work on projects whose impact is limited in time, space and reach. Big projects, perhaps,

3 Ford, Henry, and Samuel Crowther. 1922. My Life and Work. New York: Doubleday and Company. Accessible here: https://college.cengage.com/history/primary_sources/us/henry_ford_discusses.htm.

4 An example of that is Spotify, which in 2018 was used by around 200 million monthly active users. At the time, it had only 200 designers. A ratio of one designer for one million users, more or less the population of the city of Milan. See: https://spotify.design/article/reimagining-design-systems-at-spotify and https://www.statista.com/statistics/367739/spotify-global-mau/.

but hardly as gargantuan. This doesn't mean that their effort have little or no effect, but that such effect doesn't match the modern forma mentis of power as vast scale standardization. Mentions of the tremendous influence designers possess will be met by most of them with some reasonable skepticism."

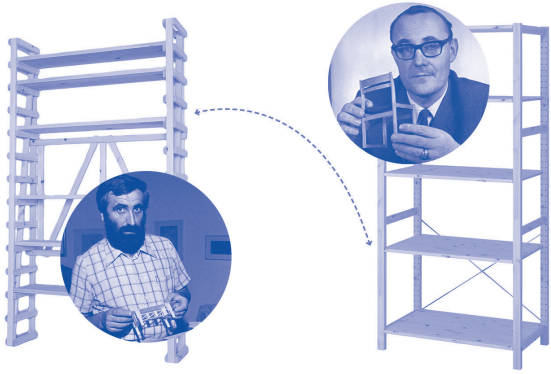
Cause and Effect

The modern, 'scalar' idea of design power also tends to place too much emphasis on the single object, as if its transformative power weren't enhanced or hindered by the environment it inhabits. As if the object weren't caught in a network of interactions with other objects. As if it weren't deriving its meaning from the ambient it resides in. A linear, almost mechanistic understanding of design power (designer > product > user[5]) masks the improvisational role that the object performs on the stage of everyday life. The protagonism of the isolated object reflects another protagonism – that of the designer. A reassuring narrative of invention also plays its part: when we perceive a groundbreaking change in habit we are tempted to look for a singular artifact that represents such change: a symbol. Then, we try to identify an individual who conceived it, possibly through a Eureka moment.

However, we shouldn't forget that while products and services affect the world, they are also affected by it, and not just after coming into existence. According to design historian Glenn Adamson, the commodity itself is a consequence of power more than a cause of it, as the commodity is shaped by power relationships before entering the stage of everyday use. While discussing the formal similarity of two bookcases conceived by two politically antipodal designers (the communist Enzo Mari and the Nazi sympathizer Ingvar Kamprad, founder of IKEA), he refers to the realization

5 The Greater Good Studio, for instance, proposes the following "theory of change": "We believe that research changes design, design changes behavior, and behavior changes the world". See: https://web.archive.org/web/20160918151937/http://www.greatergoodstudio.com:80/theoryofchange/.

that "by the time something is designed, it is usually too late to determine its political effect. Commodities are principally the outcome of power relations, not the cause of them."[6]



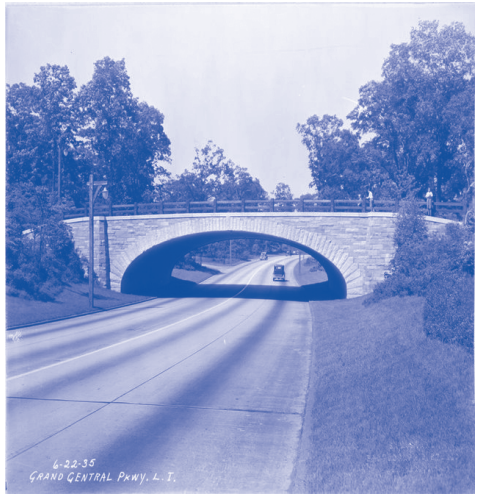
Enzo Mari on the left and Ingvar Kamprad on the right. Collage that illustrates Glenn Adamsons's article on The Nation.

Reflecting on how politics precede the use of a certain artifact, political theorist Langdon Winner mentions the infamous case of the New York's Southern State Parkway bridges. These bridges, conceived by Robert Moses in the 1920s, were too low for a bus to pass. Plain bad design? Not really. Moses deliberately limited the access of disadvantaged citizens, mostly people of color, who generally used buses to get into town.[7] This is an unusually blatant case of design wickedness. Winner himself admits that it has an almost conspiratorial sounding. But from the perspective of power, it can be considered an exception more than a rule, the exception having to do not with racism and classism, which were and are both common, but instead with the coincidence of authority and execution. In fact, Winner highlights the influence that Robert Moses had over

6 The Greater Good Studio, for instance, proposes the following "theory of change": "We believe that research changes design, design changes behavior, and behavior changes the world". See: https://web.archive.org/web/20160918151937/http://www.greatergoodstudio.com:80/theoryofchange/.

7 Winner, Langdon. 1980. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" Daedalus 109 (1): 121–36.

governors and presidents. The designer rarely has the full authority and agency to, paraphrasing Winner again, embody their intention in physical form.



Low overpass bridges on Long Island Parkways. Source: Ethics in architecture: Introducing concepts of power and empowerment by Alexandra Staub.

Design, cause or effect? Is the designed artifact at the source of a causal stream or at its estuary? This line should in fact be thought of as a circle, since humans design things, but then those things design them back. "Design designs", as Tony Fry puts it. Design doesn't only shape use, but also meaning: it impacts the way people make sense of the world, designers included.[8] However, this circularity might suggest that people are as much active in the design of their environment as they are designed by it. In reality, the environment's capacity to 'design' us is stronger than the one that we, as individual, have to design it.

8 Fry quoted in Willis, Anne-Marie. 2006. "Ontological Designing." Design Philosophy Papers 4 (2): 69–92.

Cogs and Needles

Dutch philosopher Koert van Mensvoort proposes an evolutionary perspective on the development of a common product, the Gillette razor. His provocative account is radically 'object-oriented':

> Obviously many designers and engineers have been involved in the creation of my razors over the years. No doubts these are all decent and friendly people–with good incomes too–but what more are these creators of the individual models than little cogs in the perpetuating Gillette Company? Calling them engineers and designers is arguably too much credit for the work they do, as they merely sketch the next razor model, of which one can already predict the 'innovative' new properties [...] It's not like they are in a position to think deeply on the meaning and origins of shaving, in order to reinvent this ancient ritual. Like bees in a beehive their work is determined by the logic of the larger structure.[9]

Karl Marx deemed imagination the fundamental difference between the architect and the bee, the human and the animal.[10] Van Mensvoort reverses the axiom, showing that this faculty cannot be fully exercised within a highly crystallized and interrelated industry. In a perverse twist, the commodity is here the main, powerful agent shaping the work of designers. The thing makes us more than us making the thing, not only in a physical sense, with the assembly line determining the gestures of the worker, but also intellectually, with market forces setting the objectives and constraints within which designers should work. The picture is bleak, probably too bleak. And yet, many designers feel trapped in such an "iron cage", to use Max Weber's notorious expression.

9 Mensvoort, Koert van, and Hendrik-Jan Grievink. 2015. Next Nature: Nature Changes Along With Us. Barcelona: Actar.
10 Marx, Karl. 1999. Capital. Vol. 1. Marx/Engels Internet Archive. https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/index.htm.

Design curator Paola Antonelli is more optimistic. In a recent interview she declared that:

> Design has a lot of power that is still untapped and unexplored. There are many different types of designers. They all have influence on our behavior. Some have fundamental, earth--shattering influence, like the designers behind apps and electronic appliances and the interfaces we use all the time. Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. That's design of the system but also the interface. Other designers might have less effect, but they all act under different pressure points under the great acupuncture system of human life.[11]

While acknowledging the sheer variety of existing designers, Antonelli adopts a poetic image that conflates them, with the risk of mitigating the immense power differential that designers can have. Furthermore, the acupunctural analogy doesn't say much about the specific power that design holds and the peculiar way in which such power is exercised.

Too Low in the Power Structure

The case of "earth-shattering influence" of apps and digital devices deserves further scrutiny. Interdependence, complexity and hierarchy limit the designer's attempts of to impress their personal or professional agenda into the artifacts. The structures of production, distribution and consumption, while constantly changing, are tight into a mesh of interrelations, like a tense nylon cobweb. This means that a radical intervention upon them is unlikely, and even more unlikely is the possibility that the designer alone or in a team would make such intervention. The power of design is under everyone's eyes: design has indeed changed

11 Antonelli, Paola. 2019. "MoMA curator: 'Humanity will become extinct. We need to design an elegant ending'". Interview by Suzanne LaBarre. https://www.fastcompany.com/90280777/moma-curator-we-will-become-extinct-we-need-to-design-an-elegant-ending.

the face of our planet, our way of conceiving it and the way we exist within it. Design is indeed "one of the most powerful forces in our lives", as Alice Rawsthorn argues.[12] But the fact that design is powerful doesn't necessarily imply that designers are.

This might be true both for the everyday designer, be they a smalltown solo practitioner or a corporate employee, and the design maestro. In 2004, Enzo Mari published a paid advertisement on the architectural magazine Domus. It read: "Highly experienced and qualified designer / seeks desperately / not only for himself / YOUNG ENTREPRENEUR". He did so to highlight the fact that in his industry the one truly allowing for things to happen is the entrepreneur.[13]

Enzo Mari's ad in Domus 869.

In more than one occasion, Don Norman, American pioneer of user-centered design, raised doubts on Papanek's oft-quoted claim that "There are professions more harmful than industrial design, but only a very few

12 Rawsthorn in Heller, Steven. 2014. "'Design Is One of the Most Powerful Forces in Our Lives.'" The Atlantic, March 13, 2014, sec. Culture. https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/03/design-is-one-of-the-most-powerful-forces-in-our-lives/284388/.

13 Mari, Enzo. 2004. "Inserzione a Pagamento." Domus, April 2004. It is worth pointing out that Mari still had a pretty romantic idea of the impact of design. From the ad: "A design entails a passionate alliance between two persons: a soldier of utopia (the designer) and a tiger from the real world (the entrepreneur). It is always the tiger, if he wishes, who can allow at least a fragment of utopia to be attained. Today tigers seem to be extinct." Here, Mari didn't consider the idea that the tiger of the real world, the entrepreneur, might be caged by economic imperatives.

of them". According to Norman, the motto is "well-intended but wrong: [Papanek] gives too much credit to designers who are generally too low in the power structure to matter." He adds: "Designers then (and today) are servants of their masters: Their client or employers. Design is a tool of industry, and because industry does not pay for externalities, they think nothing of destroying the environment in mining for maters (sic), in manufacturing, and in disposal of poisonous stuff."[14]

Norman is echoed by John Maeda, design-star who popularized the idea of a design-led company. In 2019 he made a somber declaration: "In reality, design is not that important." Here's his reasoning: "We know that tech people are in charge of the world: They can approve pull requests and they push the code out and right or wrong happens." Designers, far from being the center of the design process, are themselves ancillary. Would it be good, then, to change this state of affairs? Not according to Maeda, who thinks companies led by designers might achieve resonance among a design-savvy crowd, but their technical structure might be brittle, leading eventually to failure.[15]

To conclude the first part of this inquiry into the relationships between design and power, I would like to bring in some pointers regarding the possibility for the designer to inject agency into the design and therefore into the world. First, as Winner reminds us, the room for changing an artifact is greater when the typology of such artifact is initially introduced, after that phase its malleability decreases. The artifact becomes stabilized. But not every designer can be a pioneer. Most will work with consolidated types of product, such as the razor. Second, the actual position of the designer in the hierarchy of an organization matters: generally too low, according to Norman. And one can assume that the larger the structure, the more difficult is to gain a position at the top

14 Norman, Don. 2020, 2021. Email to the PhD-Design Mailing List, August 9, 2020 and March 18, 2021.
15 Schwab, Katharine. 2019. "John Maeda: 'In Reality, Design Is Not That Important.'" Fast Company, March 15, 2019. https://www.fastcompany.com/90320120/john-maeda-in-reality-design-is-not-that-important.

#05 2021,November 5

“The Loop: Medical Devices, Safety, and Care” by Pernilla Manjula Philip

In this issue of Other Worlds, Pernilla Manjula Philip reflects on the various practices of care revolving around her illness. A complex scenario emerges: the safety procedures regulated by the official healthcare system limit the well-being allowed by do-it-yourself technologies developed by independent communities of makers. The approach of these makers is, in turn, often too technical and masculine to include most users. With her artistic work, Pernilla mobilizes empathy to counterbalance this state of affairs.

Care

I did not care that much about the medical-industrial complex before I found myself in a hospital trying to wrap my head around the fact that I will never leave again. I would eventually go home, but I would bring my diagnosis with me. And with that, bring the hospital along. My brand-new illness has attached me to a world of care that I will always depend on. A lifetime of needing care.

I grew up in a Swedish household where my only direct insight into the care system was via my disabled brother. Sweden, a vast country, established a system to alleviate the physical isolation of disabled people, often distant from one another. Thanks to a governmental initiative called färdtjänst, these citizens could travel by taxi at a symbolic rate. As a teenager I once took my brother with me in his discounted taxi to buy hash in the suburbs of the city where we lived. I recall it as a disaster, because one of us had to take a dump in the dealer's apartment. But at least the taxi ride was paid for by the Swedish care system…

Twenty years later, with little warning, my pancreas stopped functioning. Bedbound and confused, I was digging out my previously unused insurance number from a messy email inbox. Unwillingly signing up to my new part-time job as stated in my medical file – type 1 diabetes. A disease that makes me life-long dependent on insulin. Leaving behind a care-free sense of time, the privilege of loosely planning my days and the ability to leave home without a packed bag of supplies. It was hard to adjust, and it was painful to re-shape.

When facing illnesses, each patient is often left to pave the way of their medical management. At times, the internet becomes a source of information from the sick-bed, offering both fear-triggering paths as well as the relief of new perspectives.

DIY

It took me a few months and some aimless searches to find the DIY (or perhaps DIT, do-it-together) community of people who share my disease and face similar struggles. I learned that there are user-driven foundations busy with software and hardware development which is made by diabetics (and their loved ones) for diabetics. Nightscout, for example, is a foundation that created a solution for following blood sugars remotely. An acquaintance of mine tells me about it:

> We use Nightscout to monitor our 2 year and a half old daughter's glucose levels. It's a great solution because it prevents us from having to interrupt her play several times per day in order to check her pump. It also allows us to keep an eye on the levels when our daughter is at our babysitter or at preschool.

When I read about DIY attempts to create a "closed loop system" by hacking into the same brand of insulin pump that I was currently using, it was not obvious for me to try them. A technical solution was simply not enough for me and I needed to understand more about my current treatment plan. I was a bit scared, to be honest, but the expected benefits outweighed the fear.

Even though I live with daily decisions involving a lethal medicine, my network of doctors, nurses, pharmacy and health insurance did offer me a feeling of safety. The option of DIY tools encouraged me to re-consider what it would take for me to abandon that and start developing new feelings of safety attached to these user-driven (hacked) medical devices.

What is looping? There are two main devices available for type 1 diabetics. One measures blood sugars (CGM) and sends this data with a few minutes delay to a receiver, generally a phone. The second is an insulin pump.

Both these devices are sometimes referred to as "black-box technology". It means that they have set limitations for targets and alarms and may block access a patient's data, making it impossible for patients to use, unless hacked into.

In a non-looping system, the only connection between these devices is the patient themselves and/or their caretaker. The official pump that I use distributes insulin by following a pre-programmed schedule, whereas my hacked closed-looping system allows both devices to communicate and automatically adjusts to my bodies glucose levels every few minutes. The open source looping system that OpenAPS and RileyLink developed, closes when these two devices communicate with each other to automatically adjusts insulin delivery. Via an algorithm it shuts off insulin injection when sugars are trending low and increase it when they are trending high. In the last year, a similar device has been approved, but the DIY version is far superior in its ability to adjust its settings, and its compatibility with type of pumps. Therefore the DIY looping system is still highly essential for myself and others.

I am now two years into my hacked looping device and I would fight anyone trying to take my artificial pancreas away from me. This system has resulted in small customized adjustments, that becomes big improvements in my sleeping pattern and general quality of life.

The diabetic DIY branches out in other ways beside the loop. Without getting too techy , it involves follow apps and hardware that widens the functions and collaboration between devices. But it can also involve individuals that illustrate how to open a black-box device that is sealed closed by the manufacturer.

Medical devices including a custom-made phone case for open-source hardware allowing various devices to communicate, making all data accessible and all settings customizable.

It is important for me to acknowledge that I do not consider open-source DIY projects an alternative to scientific knowledge, but instead I see them as holding an additional layer of care. I am transparent with my medical team and wonder how my loop would work if it weren't for my health insurance covering my pump and CGM.

When I decided to start looping, I talked to my endocrinologist. They had an issue with the legal aspect and did not encourage anything that could not hold legal grounds. However, they also showed support and understanding. It was helpful for me to involve them in my medical choices, as they inform my artistic practice and I could discuss my work processes. But it was also helpful for them, as our discussion would generate more empathy. Empathy is rarely taken into consideration when private companies develop medical devices. The basic structure of profit--based companies is self-explanatory. As a person reliant on these tools, I find the financial profit aspect to be troubling, to say the least.

Safety

In the name of safety, official medical devices go through both expensive and intensive testing by EMA (European Medicines Agency) before being released on the market in Europe. The closed-loop hardware that OpenAPS and RileyLink developed haven't gone through enough testing, which

makes it seem unsafe.

At times I wonder how much safety I am really sacrificing when using this non-approved device. The dichotomy of safe and unsafe tools is blurry for me as a type 1 diabetic. Because living with a life-threatening disease means just that – life-threatening. I inject a potentially deadly medicine several times a day to prevent an otherwise impossible life, sometimes calculating dosage in the middle of the night. I trust this device more than myself doing maths for the 2nd time in the middle of my sleep. That does not always feel safe and I'm glad to leave that calculation to a computer.

One thing is clear, the institutions that I rely on are not able to hold all of my needs. Rules and regulations are there for my protection, but this hacked device is offering me something that I am so extremely thirsty for. Like a night's sleep, more time to live and less time counting carbs. And the possibility to choose my own schedule for alarms; this may seem like a small thing, but alarm fatigue[1] is real! As a result, my hacked pump offers me a new kind of feeling of safety. An agency of my own medical management that is based on care and not on profit.

Accessibility

Not everyone has the same access to the DIY solutions for looping. Individuals well versed in hacking and making would have a confidence that others might not possess. I'm not a maker nor a hacker, so I found the technical hurdle intimidating. Where technical instructions were drily presented I was slightly put off.

After digging in technical tutorials on YouTube and instruction documents, it became apparent to me that they derive from a masculinely coded

1 Forlano, Laura. 2017. "Data Rituals in Intimate Infrastructures: Crip Time and the Disabled Cyborg Body as an Epistemic Site of Feminist Science." 2017. Catalyst. Special issue on Science Out of Feminist Theory Part 2: Remaking Science(s) 3 (2): 1–28.

language and culture. With a few important exceptions, the community seemed to be driven by men. This is apparent while browsing the Facebook support forums, the makers of instruction videos as well as within the group of developers. Although gender presentation is not the same as gender identity,[2] I wonder if some femme-identified people are discouraged from considering themselves as makers or hackers. While keeping a critical eye on lack of accessibility, I embrace the hacker's perspective of making and tinkering as collective methods of activism.

In the techno-debris video Green Cross I scramble the format of DIY YouTube tutorial, with the intent to widen the invite to participate and benefit from hacked medical devices. A battery embedded in a way that was made to not be replaced, is renewed and given additional time to function. By doing this, diabetics who are not able to afford this technology, are able to benefit from this device.

Driven by my own urgency of relying on inaccessible, "black-box" medical devices, I research the politics of healthcare. While mapping out different angles from which to tell the story of the agency of an ill-rendered body, I try to visualize both the joy and frustration of living with illness in an ableist society. I investigate how being sick can be similar to being broken. But being broken isn't the same as being disposable.

The Care Unit. A nomadic room for rest, medical management and open conversations.

2 Costanza-Chock, Sasha. 2020. Design Justice. Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 154.

My installation The Care Unit is a scenography work and a place to hang out, an atmosphere that connects the medical-industrial complex to the domestic, every day, and intimate aspects of illness. Touching upon different domains of healthcare, the objects are never clean or clear, and hold diverse narratives: personal and shared ones, fictional and autobiographical.

Inside the cell-like modular installation, you can find warped and stacked medicine boxes, a curved bed and a desk with tools for open-source research. Life hacks for joy and pleasure when needing and giving care is not an option but a necessity. Clinical and domestic objects belonging both to a home, a hospital and a DIY lab. The places that somehow follows me everywhere as I live among them all inseparably.

More information about the DIY diabetic community can be found via the hashtag #wearenotwaiting on Instagram and Twitter.

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